

The Right Honourable Nicola Sturgeon MSP
Office of the First Minister
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

5 March 2021

Dear First Minister

Event Industry Advisory Group

At the most recent meeting of the Event Industry Advisory Group (EIAG) a number of serious concerns were raised with regard to the Scottish Government's approach to exiting lock down and the removal of restrictions.

Last week's announcement regarding the Strategic Framework led to a high degree of disappointment and frustration within the sector. Whilst there is great optimism about the success of the vaccination programme, there appears to be a lack of a clear plan beyond a time frame in which the situation can be described by Government as 'reasonably certain'. Forward planning in the event industry is crucial. We therefore require much greater clarity on the expectations of the government and its public health officials over coming months in order to effectively restart.

We all appreciate how challenging the current environment is with a large number of uncertain variables but if Scotland's economy is to bounce back from this pandemic, event businesses need to start making plans for the rest of this year and beyond within the next couple of months.

As you may be aware, VisitScotland has estimated that in 2019 the event sector delivered £6bn of direct spend in Scotland, accounting for approximately half of the country's total visitor spend.

Almost all businesses in this sector have been closed down for the best part of a year. The impact on both large and small venues, organisers and suppliers has been significant, while the knock on effect on other businesses which rely on our sector is very serious indeed.

Therefore, it is vitally important that the plans to exit lockdown are determined based on the best available information. Within the next couple of months event organisers will have to start making significant financial commitments. Until such time as the Government sets out a clear path and broad timetable, the sector will be working in an information vacuum.

It is fully understood that timescales and plans may have to change as the situation develops, but an understanding of the Government's longer-term expectations, based on the current position, would be hugely helpful and enable better informed decisions to be made by event businesses.

The most obvious example would be to get an understanding of what conditions would be required to see the removal of physical distancing constraints. This may be in terms of vaccinations, virus levels, hospitalisations or any combination of these. If that is known, then progress against the criteria over time can be assessed and business planning adjusted as required. The events sector is highly professional in holding structured and controlled events and, having more information on the conditions for the coming months, will enable businesses across Scotland to start to put their plans in place.

The next concern relates to the divergence between the UK and Scottish Governments' approaches as recently announced. The UK Government's plan with a series of relaxations of restrictions and associated 'not before dates' has led to an upsurge in confidence in England. Regardless of any wider thoughts around this announcement (and it is a clear divergence from a Four Nations approach) it is important to recognise that it has a number of significant implications for Scotland.

There is a clear perception within the live entertainment and festival communities that England is more likely to be open for business and therefore focus lies there. This has implications for event producers in Scotland who are now finding it harder to engage with performers.

Festival organisers in England have been able to capitalise on the more positive messaging and achieve record levels of ticket sales, including people planning to travel from Scotland, and been able to benefit from the reduction in VAT to 5%.

We are already also seeing conference organisers preferring England to Scotland as a destination as it is perceived that there is a greater chance of events going ahead south of the border. Some events that are able to move are looking to do so.

If Scotland does indeed end up emerging from restrictions behind England it could mean that the financial support measures put in place by the UK Government will end earlier in the recovery cycle in Scotland, creating a disadvantage for Scottish businesses.

The final concern raised by the group is around the adoption of WHO guidance. There appears to be an inconsistent approach to this guidance, with generally, only the more cautious measures being adopted. We would welcome a greater understanding on this approach.

Having laid out our concerns, what are we asking?

1. At the earliest possible opportunity (potentially week beginning 15 March) to set out a **clear roadmap for the lifting of restrictions to the point of the full return of events**. As mentioned above it is fully understood that there is no certainty around this and that timelines may change and will be heavily caveated.
2. A process of **information sharing between government and the event industry with a longer outlook timeframe** is needed to allow the sector to operate on the basis of the best available information at any point in time. This would include continued direct engagement with public health officials.
3. There requires to be **more positive messaging around the return of events in Scotland**. This is in terms of providing confidence to organisers and audiences of a level of ambition and the safety measures being put in place.

4. We would encourage **the pursuit of a Four Nations approach** to recovery. If there is divergence from England in terms of the lifting of restrictions, the challenges this presents as outlined above should be recognised.
5. If **WHO measures** are to be adopted, then this should be a consistent policy or, if this is not possible, a clear, evidence-based explanation is provided for the more cautious approach.

Please be assured that we do recognise how difficult the management of the pandemic must be and this letter is written in the spirit of partnership that has been established. You can have confidence in a highly regulated sector that has public safety at its core.

The EIAG would also like to thank the Scottish Government for the range of funding that has been provided during this time and we would like to continue our positive working relationship with you. However, this letter also outlines the risk that, the longer the recovery period, the greater the level of additional support the sector will require due to our prolonged shut down.

I'm sure that you, as we all do, look forward to the safe return of events at earliest opportunity and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Peter Duthie
Chair - Event Industry Advisory Group (EIAG)